

The University of Chicago

**THE BEHAVIOR OF
PHENYLACETONITRILE AND ALPHA-
PHENYLBUTYRONITRILE WITH
SODIUM ETHYLATE**

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE FACULTY IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY

By
KEITH TRUEX SWARTZ

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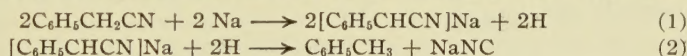
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THE BEHAVIOR OF PHENYLACETONITRILE AND ALPHA-PHENYLBUTYRONITRILE WITH SODIUM ETHYLATE¹

BY KEITH TRUEX SWARTZ

The isolation of the pure alkali salts of phenylacetonitrile and α -phenylbutyronitrile by Rising in collaboration with Zee,^{2a} Muskat and Lowe^{2b} and Braun,^{2c} and of the former nitrile by Upson,³ involved the treatment of the nitriles with the alkali metals or amides. As observed by E. von Meyer⁴ and his co-workers, and by Upson, and shown quantitatively for phenylacetonitrile by Braun, the reaction of the nitriles with sodium takes the course



The use of sodamide instead of sodium incurs no reduction of the salts.

It was suggested earlier^{2a} that sodium ethylate might prove to be a useful reagent for obtaining the salts of these and other nitriles. The present paper describes the behavior of phenylacetonitrile and α -phenylbutyronitrile with solid sodium ethylate in dry boiling ether in an atmosphere of nitrogen. The ethylate has been used successfully in a great number of condensation reactions of nitriles⁵ and the intermediate formation of sodium salts of the nitriles used is ordinarily assumed. We planned to

¹ The material presented in this dissertation was published as an article by Mary M. Rising and Keith T. Swartz in *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, **54**, 2021 (1932).

² (a) Rising and Zee, *ibid.*, **49**, 541 (1927); **50**, 1699 (1928); (b) Rising, Muskat and Lowe, *ibid.*, **51**, 262 (1929); (c) Rising and Braun, *ibid.*, **52**, 1069 (1930).

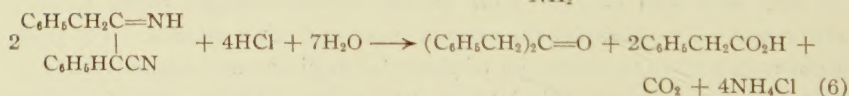
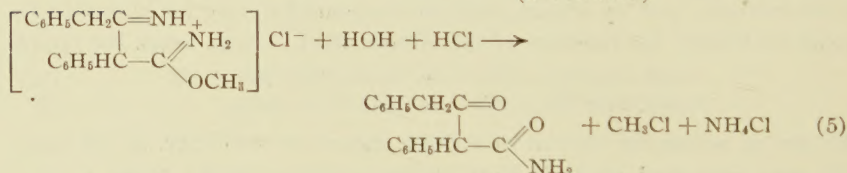
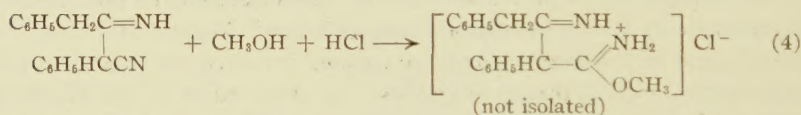
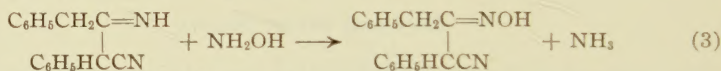
³ Upson, Maxwell and Parmelee, *ibid.*, **52**, 1971 (1930).

⁴ Wache, *J. prakt. Chem.*, **39**, 245 (1889); von Meyer, *ibid.*, **52**, 114 (1895), etc.

⁵ Higson and Thorpe, *J. Chem. Soc.*, **89**, 1455 (1906); Avery and Upson, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, **30**, 600 (1908); Daughters, *ibid.*, **39**, 1927 (1917), and others.

isolate the intermediate products in the case of the nitriles studied, using the extremely delicate technique developed by Braun for handling the very unstable salts.

Under the conditions used by us phenylacetoneitrile reacts with sodium ethylate to form a considerable quantity of sodium phenylacetoneitrile. The major part of the salt formed apparently condenses with phenylacetoneitrile to form a dimer of the nitrile, since the main product of the reaction is α, γ -phenyl- α -iminopropionitrile (dimolecular phenylacetoneitrile), $\text{C}_6\text{H}_5\text{CH}_2\text{C}(=\text{NH})\text{CH}(\text{C}_6\text{H}_5)\text{CN}$, formed in about 25% yield. Sodium phenylacetoneitrile was not isolated from the reaction mixture, in which it is soluble, but its presence there, and the quantity formed, were shown by treatment of this mixture with benzyl bromide, and the resulting formation of α, β -diphenylpropionitrile, $\text{C}_6\text{H}_5\text{CH}(\text{CH}_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_5)\text{CN}$, in 11% yield. The identity of the dinitrile was established by the analytical data for the compound and by the results of molecular weight determination. Its structure was proved by its conversion into α, γ -diphenyl- β -oximinopropionitrile, $\text{C}_6\text{H}_5\text{CH}_2\text{C}(=\text{NOH})\text{CH}(\text{C}_6\text{H}_5)\text{CN}$, and by a study of the products of hydrolysis of the dimer. The equations are



It is to be concluded that the mononitrile condenses with itself in the presence of sodium ethylate to form the dimer with intermediate formation of the sodium salt of the mononitrile. The product of this aldol-like condensation is the sodium salt of the dimer, which is hydrolyzed to the dinitrile. The dinitrile obtained, of molecular weight 228–235, was a viscous yellow oil of b. p. 222–223° (uncorr.) at 2.75 mm. pressure.

Dimolecular phenylacetoneitrile was first prepared by von Meyer,⁴ repeating the work of Wache,⁴ who studied the behavior of phenylacetoneitrile with sodium in ether but failed to isolate the dinitrile. Von Meyer obtained a viscous oil from which he prepared an oxime of melting point 107°,

identical with that obtained from cyanodibenzyl ketone, and he concluded that the oil was α, γ -phenyl- β -iminopropionitrile. Atkinson and Thorpe⁶ prepared the dimolecular nitrile by heating phenylacetonitrile with sodium in alcohol for half an hour. Rondou⁷ obtained the dinitrile by a Grignard reaction.

α -Phenylbutyronitrile, $C_6H_5CH(C_2H_5)CN$, was not found by us to condense with itself under the influence of sodium ethylate. After treatment of this nitrile with the ethylate under the conditions used in the case of phenylacetonitrile, 83% of the mononitrile used was recovered. The material obtained in a reaction of the nitrile with sodium ethylate was treated with methyl alcohol and hydrogen chloride. The products of this reaction were methyl α -phenylbutyrate and a substance of melting point 83° (uncorr.), thought to be α -phenylbutyramide. The amide, hitherto unprepared, was synthesized from α -phenylbutyryl chloride, also previously unknown, and ammonia, and showed a melting point of 83° (uncorr.). The melting point of a mixture of the amides obtained by the two methods was 83° . α -Phenylbutyryl chloride of boiling point 122 – 125° at 20 mm. was obtained from α -phenylbutyric acid and thionyl chloride.

The investigation of the tautomerism of nitriles is being continued in this Laboratory. An exhaustive study of the conductivities of a series of nitriles is under way, and the results of this work should form a logical basis for selection of nitriles best suited to the study of separation of tautomers. Salts of the nitriles with heavy metals are being studied.

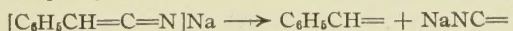
Experimental

1. Reaction of Phenylacetonitrile with Sodium Ethylate in Ether.—Sodium ethylate was prepared from sodium (4 g.) and absolute alcohol (85 cc.) containing 25 cc. of absolute ether in an atmosphere of nitrogen. When the excess of liquids was removed by evaporation, solid white ethylate remained. Phenylacetonitrile (25.5 g., a 25% excess) was dropped into an ether suspension of sodium ethylate in an apparatus essentially like that used by Braun,^{2c} the reaction being carried out in an atmosphere of nitrogen. All reagents and apparatus were dried thoroughly. The reaction mixture was refluxed for four hours, then 15 cc. of ligroin was added to precipitate unchanged sodium ethylate. The mixture was allowed to stand overnight; it was then filtered and three volumes of ligroin added to the filtrate to precipitate sodium phenylacetonitrile. The precipitate obtained consisted largely of sodium benzoate.⁸ Sodium phenylaceto-

⁶ Atkinson and Thorpe, *J. Chem. Soc.*, **89**, 1906 (1906).

⁷ Rondou, *Bull. soc. chim. Belg.*, **31**, 231 (1922).

⁸ It is evident that in spite of the precautions used to exclude air from apparatus and reagents some oxygen was present. The formation of benzoic acid may signify the breakdown of sodium phenylacetonitrile as follows



as previously postulated by Rising and Zee,^{2a} who obtained benzyl alcohol after the treatment of the salt with aqueous acid. Upson and Thompson [*J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, **44**, 186 (1922)] obtained benzoic acid from the impure salt following its exposure to air. A study of controlled oxidation of the salt will presently be made.

nitrile was not isolated from the reaction mixture, but its presence there was proved by treatment of a reaction mixture, obtained as just described, with benzyl bromide, whereupon α,β -diphenylpropionitrile was obtained in 11% yield. This nitrile melted at 57.5° (uncorr.), boiled at 163–164° (uncorr.) at 3 mm., and yielded on hydrolysis α,β -diphenylpropionic acid of melting point 81–82° (uncorr.).¹⁰

2. α,γ -Diphenyl- β -iminopropionitrile. **Preparation.**—The reaction of phenylacetoneitrile (46.1 g.) with sodium ethylate (prepared from 7.3 g. of sodium and 140 cc. of alcohol) was carried out as just described. The reaction solution was filtered after being refluxed, and was then treated with water; the ether layer was separated and dried over fused calcium chloride. The ether was then removed by evaporation and the oily residue was distilled, yielding about 16 g. of phenylacetoneitrile and 10 g. (a 25% yield) of the dimolecular nitrile, of boiling point 222–223° (uncorr.) at 2.75 mm.

Anal. Calcd. for $C_{16}H_{14}N_2$: C, 82.00; H, 6.03; N, 11.97; mol. wt., 234. Found: C, 81.92, 82.11; H, 6.14, 6.28; N, 11.95, 12.06; mol. wt., 231 (av., benzene as solvent).

Proof of Structure. (a) **Oxime Formation.**—Treatment of the dinitrile in alcohol with hydroxylamine hydrochloride and barium carbonate (Equation 3) produced an oxime of melting point 106–107°, α,γ -diphenyl- β -oximinopropionitrile.^{4,6}

(b) **Hydrolysis.**—(a') Treatment of the dinitrile with concentrated hydrochloric acid¹¹ in a bomb tube at 150° for eight hours (Equation 6) produced carbon dioxide, phenylacetic acid¹² of melting point 76° (uncorr.), and dibenzyl ketone¹³ of melting point 34–35° (uncorr.). The identity of the ketone was established by its conversion into dibenzyl ketone phenylhydrazone¹⁴ of melting point 125–126° (uncorr.). (b') Treatment of the dinitrile (4 g.) with methyl alcohol (15 cc.) and hydrogen chloride gas at 0° to saturation (Equations 4 and 5) produced phenylacetophenylacetamide of melting point 163.5–164° (uncorr.) formed in 76% yield.¹¹ The amide was hydrolyzed by alkali to phenylacetic acid of melting point 75–76° (uncorr.).

3. α -Phenylbutyryl Chloride.— α -Phenylbutyric acid (14 g.) was refluxed with thionyl chloride (100 g.) for eight hours. The reaction mixture was fractionated and the fraction of distillate, 14 g. in quantity, of boiling point 122–125° (uncorr.) at 20 mm. was found to be pure butyryl chloride, produced in 89.9% yield.

Anal. Calcd. for $C_{10}H_{11}OCl$: Cl, 19.42. Found: Cl, 19.37, 19.56.

4. α -Phenylbutyramide.—Dry ammonia was passed into an ether solution containing 5 g. of α -phenylbutyryl chloride. A vigorous reaction followed and precipitation of the amide and of ammonium chloride occurred. The precipitate was brought on a filter and washed with water to remove the salt. The amide was recrystallized from alcohol and melted at 83° (uncorr.). The yield was 63% of the theoretical. The amide was also obtained, together with methyl α -phenylbutyrate, by treatment of the crude reaction product, obtained by treatment of α -phenylbutyronitrile with sodium ethylate as previously described for phenylacetoneitrile, and consisting largely of unchanged α -phenylbutyronitrile, with methyl alcohol and hydrogen chloride at 0°. The melting point of a mixture of the amide obtained by the two methods was 83° (uncorr.).

Anal. Calcd. for $C_{10}H_{13}ON$: C, 73.57; H, 8.03; N, 8.59. Found: C, 73.78, 73.63; H, 8.23, 8.23; N, 8.67, 8.80.

⁹ Meyer, *Ber.*, **21**, 1308 (1888).

¹⁰ Miller and Röhde, *ibid.*, **25**, 2018 (1892).

¹¹ Walther and Schickler, *J. prakt. Chem.*, **55**, 350 (1897).

¹² Möller and Strecker, *Ann.*, **113**, 64 (1860).

¹³ Stobbe, Russwurm and Schulz, *ibid.*, **308**, 175 (1899).

¹⁴ Francis, *J. Chem. Soc.*, **75**, 868 (1899).

Summary

1. Under the conditions used by us sodium ethylate is not a useful reagent for obtaining the sodium salt of phenylacetoneitrile.
2. A considerable quantity of sodium phenylacetoneitrile is undoubtedly formed in the reaction of the nitrile with sodium ethylate but much of the salt condenses with the mononitrile to form a dinitrile.
3. α -Phenylbutyronitrile was not found to condense with itself under the influence of sodium ethylate in ether.
4. The syntheses of the chloride and amide of α -phenylbutyric acid are reported.



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